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From baggage handlers to janitors, Pittsburgh International airport's new terminal will (still) rely on behind-the-scenes staff

Longtime employees share stories about tracking down the owners of a lost stuffed bunny and chance encounters with Mick Jagger and Cher

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Patti Getty's eyes couldn't stop drifting to the stuffed bunny sitting next to her on the customer service desk at Pittsburgh International Airport.

It was a chilly February morning, and one of the airport's volunteers had dropped off the bunny after someone discovered it near the baggage claim. Ms. Getty, a mother of four, ruminated on how much that worn, lop-eared plush meant to the child who'd lost it.

"Someone has lost something that they really, really love," she said.

It would be difficult to track down the owner, but it was worth a shot, she decided.

Adam Babetski
Through 3 decades and 3 terminals, these Pittsburgh airport employees have seen it all

Ms. Getty recruited the airport's social media team. They filmed the bunny on a tour of the terminal — hitching a ride in a TSA checkpoint bin, and even sipping on a martini at one of the bars.

Thousands of Instagram engagements later, she received a call from a 5-year-old girl's family. Soon after, an elderly couple arrived at the customer service desk to retrieve the bunny for their great-granddaughter.

Just another day at work, Ms. Getty said.

"No matter what it is, from a diamond to a bunny, we go to great lengths n'at to try to help," she said.

As Pittsburgh International Airport prepares to open its new $1.7 billion terminal, ongoing day-to-day operations wouldn't be possible without the hundreds of under-the-radar employees responsible for keeping things from slipping through the cracks. Now they face a unique challenge: Keeping one terminal operating smoothly while moving into another — all with the understanding that the transition must be seamless.

"No matter what it is, from a diamond to a bunny, we go to great lengths n'at to try to help"
— Customer Service Representative Patti Getty

A prime location for confused passengers

Ms. Getty has worked at the airport for more than 30 years, on the help desk for a decade.

She and her family pride themselves on their long-standing connection to airports and Pittsburgh International. Her father was a private pilot. Her husband, an electronic technician, recently retired from the Allegheny County Airport Authority. Her children all work for Pittsburgh International.

Adam Babetski
Thousands turn out for their first look at Pittsburgh International Airport's new terminal

"Where else would you want to be?" she said. "It's what we do."

If she's in the terminal, Ms. Getty said, she's never truly off-duty. In the restroom, taking a break, walking around — it's easy to spot people in need of help.

"All it takes is a stop and a look at the face, and you know," she said.

She gets many questions, but Ms. Getty can't answer them all. That's where Volunteer Program Specialist April Laukaitis and her staff of roughly 120 helpers come in.

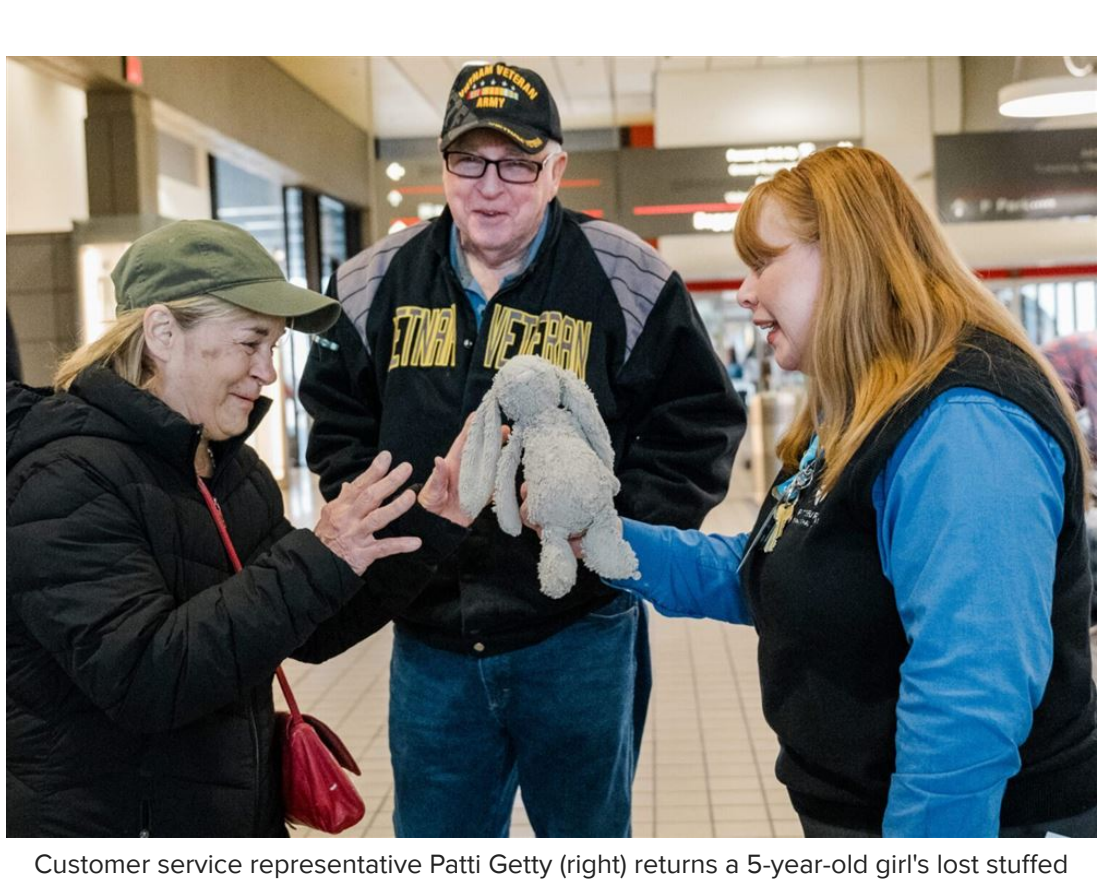
The airport's volunteers are mostly retirees, and they work in groups of 10 at a time, staffing their desk on the baggage level or roaming the terminal with iPads to pass questions along to the help desk.

Carol Eiden, 83, said that she became a volunteer because she enjoys the social connections.

"It's a goal to come and meet people and get out and do something constructive," she said.

The landside terminal is a prime location for confused passengers -— "If I'm standing out here, I could get 100 questions," Ms. Laukaitis said.

"In an hour," Ms. Getty added.



Customer service representative Patti Getty (right) returns a 5-year-old girl's lost stuffed bunny to her great-grandparents in Pittsburgh International Airport's landside terminal on Feb. 5.
(Courtesy of Pittsburgh International Airport)

Moments later, Ms. Getty was approached by an older couple who were lost. Ms. Getty wonders about such travelers' backstories — Was the couple visiting a new grandchild? Were they here for a funeral?

"You don't know what's going on and you have to have that love and compassion," she said. "You can have a million signs around, but they're looking beyond, because there's so much on their brain — 'Did I close the garage door?' 'Did I unplug my curling iron?' 'Did I pack my contact solution?'"

Once the new terminal opens, Ms. Getty's desk will be located near ground transportation on its lowest level.

Ms. Laukaitis' office is staying on Concourse A of the airside terminal, but her volunteers are getting a new break room.

"They've been here helping for 20 years, and they finally have their own space," Ms. Laukaitis said.

Ms. Laukaitis' volunteers will be "all hands on deck" for the first several weeks after the new terminal opens, she said. She's thinking about doubling shifts to 20 volunteers. She also oversees the airport's therapy dogs, PIT Paws, who will be roving the gates.

Passengers will have a lot of questions about the new terminal, Ms. Getty and Ms. Laukaitis said — as they themselves did during their first tour. To prepare for those questions, staff tour the new facility every week and meet with airport CEO Christina Cassotis for regular briefings, they said.

Ms. Laukaitis was at the new terminal's groundbreaking and signed the final beam for the topping-out ceremony in 2023.

"I got to see all the scaffolding turn into this beautiful structure," she said. "It's like working in an art museum."

Mick Jagger has a question

Keeping the airport clean while hosting millions of passengers a year is the responsibility of around 100 custodians who work for ISS Facility Services.

Manager Oshea Vreen and his team are preparing for the new terminal's opening by holding regular meetings to get a feel for the terminal's traffic patterns and layout. After staff adjust to the new terminal's "wow factor," their day-to-day tasks won't change much, Mr. Vreen said.

"Our focus is to make sure every day looks like a ribbon cutting," he said.

ISS is a 24-hour operation, as is much of the airport. Employees are assigned to one of three shifts: 6 a.m. to 2:30 p.m., 2:30 p.m. to 10:30 p.m., and 10:30 p.m. to 6:30 a.m., which overlap slightly to ensure that there are no gaps in coverage, Mr. Vreen said.

Rose Reed works the morning shift and said that cleaning a massive facility like the airport is a "team effort."

"We all chip in and help each other," she said.

"Our focus is to make sure every day looks like a ribbon cutting"
— ISS Site Manager Oshea Vreen, who oversees airport custodians

Larger teams come in late at night when there's less foot traffic to handle more labor-intensive tasks like power-washing, stripping and waxing, and cleaning carpets, Mr. Vreen said.

He said he's always on call. Mr. Vreen is there during emergencies to make sure custodians receive blood-borne kits and Hepatitis B shots. If the airport doesn't reach out to him first, he'll let them know what happened so they can inspect the area as well.

Custodians use blood-borne kits when they cut themselves on metal infrastructure like the airport's escalators. The kits typically have gloves, antiseptic wipes and bags to put the materials in for proper disposal, airport official Dan Lagiovane said.

Sometimes Mr. Vreen will show up unannounced just to make sure that everything is functioning properly, he said. "My shift is 24/7."

Custodial services are a dirty job that can sometimes feel thankless, so Mr. Vreen arranges dinners and other social functions to show staff his appreciation.

"I let them know every day — we are janitorial, but the airport couldn't function one day without you," he said.

Ms. Reed, one of the airport's longest-tenured custodians, has worked at Pittsburgh International since 1992, right after the current terminal opened.

"I always say I came with the concrete," she joked.

Ms. Reed has cleaned just about every room in the landside terminal, plus restrooms on the baggage level of the airside terminal. These days, she's responsible for the airport's nerve center: The executive offices on the landside terminal's fourth floor, where Ms. Cassotis and other executives work. Those offices are staffed around the clock in some capacity, as airport employees monitor for bad weather or are working out the logistics of a major event like a presidential visit.

Each morning, she retrieves her cart from the custodians' landside office and loads it with window cleaner, Swiffer dusters, dust pans and other essentials like toilet paper and paper towels.

"I always try to make everything extra special when I'm cleaning the executive offices — I like to keep Christina's office very nice," she said. "I take pride in my work, and I try to make everything just like it should be."

April Laukaitis (left) is a volunteer program specialist at Pittsburgh International Airport.
(Courtesy of Pittsburgh International Airport)

The current landside terminal's future is unclear; spokesman Bob Kerlik said that the airport will maintain offices there in the near term.

That means ISS will be there to keep them clean.

Sometimes, custodians pitch in beyond assigned duties.

When Mr. Vreen was working in the old terminal in the 1980s, he ran into Rolling Stones frontman Mick Jagger, who asked him where he should expect to find local media. Mr. Vreen knew that reporters wouldn't be far away.

"As soon as you go out that door, they'll be waiting for you," he recalled telling him.

Mr. Jagger is one of the many celebrities ISS custodians have met passing through Pittsburgh International. Mr. Vreen remembers friendly chats with actor Mel Gibson and blues singer B.B. King. Ms. Reed once got autographs from Cher and Muhammad Ali (who told her that she was doing "an excellent job").

"I guess when people come to Pittsburgh International Airport, they feel at home and they act like it," Mr. Vreen said.

A new baggage system

When passengers check in their bags at one of Pittsburgh International's 15 airline desks, all they can do is hope that their belongings are in good hands once they disappear into the baggage system's sprawling 7.5 miles of conveyor belts.

It's up to workers like Airline Service Technician Tom Riordan to ensure that luggage reaches its destination, and without delay.

"Anybody would be happy when their bag is down at the baggage claim — you get your bag and you're on your way," Mr. Riordan said. "That's our job."

Mr. Riordan has worked for the airport authority since 2005, and before that, as a mechanic for USAir. He's spent the past two decades driving a golf cart through the half-mile-long tunnels separating the landside and airside terminals, inspecting baggage as it rumbles by.

Baggage currently travels on two lines in either direction, with one serving as a backup in case of a mechanical failure, Mr. Riordan said. He's one of around 20 workers who keep the process going by greasing the conveyor belts' bearings to reduce friction, handling electrical issues and replacing conveyor belts' motors.

Bags go through an X-ray and are sorted by machines called matrixes, which scan the barcodes airline workers place on them.

In the new terminal, the baggage system will be condensed to three miles, since the new landside terminal will be directly connected to the airside terminal.

Pittsburgh International will become the first airport in the country to replace its traditional induction motors with Permanent Magnet motors, which feature gentler acceleration and deceleration, improved energy efficiency and less wear and tear, which led to costly downtime in the past, Mr. Riordan said.

He and his colleagues will still be responsible for cleaning up debris that comes off bags on their journey — including the "bling" customers decorate their luggage with, he said.

The "luggage" worst suited for the system are garbage bags, Mr. Riordan said, which rarely survive the trip intact. Mr. Riordan remembered watching a garbage bag that was inexplicably held together with tape tumble out of a bin, spilling its contents all over the floor.

"The oddest thing I ever saw," he said.

Workers deliver unclaimed tagged bags to the airline's office, where customers can retrieve them. Mr. Riordan becomes more involved when there's an unclaimed bag without a tag, retracing where it could have come from based on which matrix sorted it and what airline desks were nearby.

"And it sure helps if [the bag is] a different color bag than black," he added. "If you have a pink bag or a red bag, usually a little easier to identify."

Baggage workers don't typically interact face-to-face with customers, so Mr. Riordan enjoys it when he can actually meet the people he's trying to assist.

"It's nice to sometimes go down to baggage claim, and we'll see who's missing the bag," he said. "We'll ask questions."

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